

HYBRID IDENTITIES: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF *JASMINE & THE MISTRESS OF SPICES*

SUBHASHREE MOHANTY

Doctor, Bhimtangi, Bhubaneswar, odisha, India

ABSTRACT

Diasporic identities are characterized by a continuing relationship to a homeland that may either be physical, when individuals or group members continue to visit the homeland, or based on an imaginary community with the knowledge that they cannot, or will not return. Immigrants live and share the cultural life and traditions of two distinct peoples as they realize that they may never be fully accepted by their new nation and maintain memories, myths, customs and traditions of their original homeland. They position themselves astride the boundaries of two different cultures. Unable and unwilling to assimilate, these immigrants exist as on the margin of two cultures and two societies, which never get completely interpenetrated and fused. To account for this duality, immigrants assert their individuality by declaring their hyphenated identity. However such transformations come after great loss and compromise; most of the times not without violence, in which one self seems to annihilate another in the in between spaces. In the act of becoming, when the old subjectivity and the new subjectivity collide, psychological violence is inevitable. These ideas of violence take textual forms in many different ways.

This paper is a comparative analysis of the textual representations of hybrid

identities in the two novels taken: *The Mistress of Spices* and *Jasmine*.

KEYWORDS: Hybridity, Immigrant, Duality, Diaspora

INTRODUCTION

In considering hybridization as a process of healing, the role of gender cannot be ignored. The women immigrants potentially suffer from double discrimination because of their being women and immigrants. As the women perceive both their race and sexuality through new and varied paradigms, a contradiction born out of varying levels of consciousness characterizes their lives. There is uncertainty in understanding the nature of their identities, and their adaptability to the social-cultural milieu of the host country. As cultural boundaries meet, communicate and negotiate, a new hybrid space emerges. The hybrid figures born of this crossing or transgressing of their boundaries become indecisive about their identity. This dual or the hyphenated identity makes them oscillate between their two cultures and feel a conflict or a tension arising between cultures. Sometimes immigrants manage to assimilate at the expense of their original and ancestral culture or, at the other end, they fail to blend in with their new environment. (Bhabha 2)

The central characters in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's

The Mistress of Spices are born in small villages of India. Mukherjee's heroine has a

Seemingly normal childhood in comparison with Divakaruni's female protagonist. Born

as Jyoti. She marries a progressive young man named Prakash Vihar, who then renames her Jasmine. Prakash's renaming of Jasmine is a representation of her initial migration away

from traditional Indian customs and culture. In an unexpected turn in the story, Prakash is murdered, and Jasmine finds herself a widow at the age of seventeen. Heartbroken, she sets out for America to fulfill the life-long dream that her husband once had. Jasmine has her first encounter with American racial categorizations when she meets Half-Face, the captain of the ship in which she reached America. Finding herself without a place to stay and trusting Half-Face, Jasmine accepts his offer to allow him to accompany her. But at the motel, Half-Face rapes her. Jasmine's reaction to the rapist's violence is like re-inventing her own self. She mutilates her tongue, and disguised as Kali, "Mouth open, pouring blood, my red tongue out" kills her violator (*Jasmine* 118). The rape makes her ashamed and afraid of her sexuality. Earlier in her married life her husband though viewed Jasmine as a sexual being, he respected her privacy and space viewing her sexuality as independent of his. The trauma of her rape results in the greatest change in her consciousness. A new identity is formed through conscious destructions of her traditional identity. In a symbolic way, Jasmine burns her clothes in the trash bin suggesting destruction of the old traditions.

The meeting with Lillian Gordon starts the process of assimilation, with a temporary home and a temporary name; Jasmine as Jazzy, a symbol of her entrance into and acceptance of American culture. Jasmine leaves Lillian to move in with a traditional Indian family in Hushing, New York. Yet she soon finds herself stifled by their strict adherence to Indianness. It is as though she has simply wandered into a continuation of her former teenage days. Her former identities are never completely erased, and keep on emerging in specific moments. In an attempt to forget her past and all the horrific experiences, Jasmine tries to distance herself from everything Indian. In an attempt to flee from her past she moves to New York City to become the au pair for an American family.

Though Taylor is married, he and Jasmine begin a romantic relationship. As she falls in love with him, she wants to change herself into the being she believes Taylor sees her as; a transformation into a woman who is confident and refined but somewhat asexual. Jasmine's desire to change for Taylor arises out of her own desire to erase her associations with her sexuality.

Sadly, this identity is also cut short rather abruptly when the past stalks her once again, manifested in the murderer of her husband, Sukhwinder. Jasmine finds that her former selves of Jyoti and Jasmine and her current identities of Jassy and Jase begin to emerge all at once. Unable to live with conflicting identities and the self-perceptions associated with each, she flees to Baden County, Iowa to start her life over yet again.

Jasmine creates her final identity when she moves to Baden and meets Bud Ripplemeyer, an American banker who instantly falls in love with her. They eventually marry and Bud renames Jasmine as Jane, yet another evolution of her identity. Jasmine thrives on Bud's Orientalist fantasy of her, and in essence his perception of her sexuality is what allows her to embrace her new identity, so she is able to "rejuvenate" Bud by being the sexual, passionate and powerful woman she now sees herself as (*Jasmine* 200).

Yet Jasmine cannot remain in this stable life in Baden. The end of the novel finds Jasmine moving to California with Taylor, uncertain of what the future will bring but nevertheless confident in her decision to leave. Mukherje aptly conveys the sense of uncertainty that is the essence of diasporic identity formation.

The central character Tiloin Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* is born with supernatural

abilities. In Tilo's preteen years, pirates storm into her home, murder her entire family and abduct Tilo, taking her on board their ship as a prisoner. Eventually, Tilo overthrows the pirate captain to become the pirate "queen, leading her pirates to fame and glory, so that bards sang their fearless exploits" (*The Mistress of Spices* 20).

In the mystical island, under the care of the First Mother, the eldest and wisest teacher, Tilo and women like her are trained in the art of listening and controlling the spices, and are then sent forth into the greater world to aid humanity. When Tilo arrives on the Island, she and the other young girls like her are given new identities, indicating that the past is being relegated to memory and new personas are being forged, "For when you came to this island you left your old names behind, and have remained nameless since" (Ibid 40). Tilo receives her new name and identity, leaving her childhood in a village in India behind her, and assuming a temporary persona of the uncertain present rather than the definitive and historical past. Before Tilo is sent to Oakland, the First Mother gives her a knife as a gift, the purpose of which Tilo believes is "... to cut my moorings from the past, the future. To keep me always rocking at sea" (51). She has entered a state of liminality, a space between the past and the future and without a precise knowledge of present. The Island is the first diasporic space that we encounter.

Tilo is transported to America by means of 'Shampati's Fire', a reference to the bird of myth from *The Ramayana*. Her journey to America is a form of rebirth. She emerges from the fire on a bed of ash like a phoenix. America is yet another interstitial space, for the island of the past is no longer her home, while America is still too unfamiliar.

Tilo finds the past inescapable, for the possible admonitions of the First Mother constantly plague her present consciousness. She often dreams of the island, and even engages in a silent mental dialogue with the First Mother across the expanses of space. Her past becomes a part of her current sphere, making it impossible for her to live simply in the present.

Her experiences with race and class, linked together in South Asian formations of identity also plays a determinant in her identity construction. As Tilo observes the manner in which South Asians are treated in America, she begins to formulate a conception of her place in the overall structure of American race relations. Tilo first encounters the brutality of racism when one of her working class patrons, Mohan, is brutally assaulted by two young white men one evening. She experiences Mohan's pain and Veena's suffering as if it were her own, crying out after her vision of the beating, "My limbs ache as after a long illness, my sari is damp with shiver-sweat, and in my heart I cannot tell where your pain ends and mine begins" (172). In contrast the upper class South Asians do not face racism and prejudice. This difference illustrates that not only skin colour, but class also influences the creation of identity. She soon realizes that the South Asians in America is considered neither white nor black in American society, but rather a race in-between, depending on one's particular class.

The first time Tilo exits the comfort of her store, she experiences an intense wave of longing for a place to call 'home': "I run my hand over the door, which looks so alien in outdoor light, and I am struck by the sudden vertigo of homelessness" (128). She does not have a home in the traditional sense, and America is just another point in her geographical migrations. Her emotions are an extreme version of the diasporic experience where home does not exist except in the space of idealizing memory.

Tilo's gift is her ability to read into the lives of all those who enter her store, seeing all of the problems they endure as they assimilate, feeling their daily sufferings and understanding even their most private thoughts and wishes.

Ironically, she is incapable of actually perceiving herself. In fact, she is forbidden from looking in a mirror as she performs her duties as a Mistress of Spices. She formulates her identity upon the vision of others, through the conflicting perceptions of her own self.

When she dons her first American outfit and walks out into the street on which her store is located, she makes transition between two states of mind and possesses a consciousness that she believes is that of an American but at the same time it is a foreign and other consciousness for her. This sense of in-between-ness is also inherent in Tilo's perception of her sexuality. She observes some of her female patrons fulfilling the role of a traditional submissive Indian housewife, with patriarchal dominance and instances of domestic abuse. Yet she also observes the young, sexualized and flirtatious patrons who come to her store. Between these two extremes of sexuality of South Asian women, she begins to perceive her own sexuality. In her behavior in the store, Tilo typifies the traditional submissive Indian woman and perceived so by her various patrons. Her passionate side becomes evident in her relationship with Raven. Even in their initial encounters, he appeals to Tilo's sexual side, creating emotions in her that she had never experienced before.

As she moves through the maze of American culture, she desires even more to see herself, to view her life through her own eyes rather than the perspectives of others. Her moment of 'self-perception' occurs after she questions the prohibition of mirrors for Mistresses. Before she looks at her reflection, she decides to drink a special potion, a concoction whose power stems from the spice *Makaradwaj*, and is considered the conqueror of time. This potion will transform Tilo to a body of youthful beauty. Over the course of three days, her beauty increases as the layers of age peel away. As she gazes into the mirror, she sees "a face that gives away nothing, a goddess-face free of mortal blemish Only the eyes are human, frail" (279). She has a dream in which the First Mother tells her that she only has three more days in America, and on the third day she will have to enter once again into Shampati's Fire and return to the island. Yet when the moment arrives for the fire to consume her, Tilo is surprised to find that the flames do not envelop her as they did once long ago. Rather, she is transformed back into the body of the old woman. When Tilo returns to the body with which she experienced the different perceptions of race and sexuality, she is in essence accepting her fragmented selves in place of a unified identity.

The novel closes with Tilo renaming herself Maya, which "can mean many things.

Illusion, spell, enchantment, the power that keeps this imperfect world going day after

Day" (317). Maya is also an ancient Sanskrit name, and the juxtaposition of a

Name representative of a cultural past with Tilo's present suggests that she still lives in

Between spheres. In naming herself, Tilo accepts her multiple consciousnesses that allow

Her to exist as not as Indian or American only, but rather in between contradictory spaces

and times comprising the rather ambiguous landscape of her existence.

Both *Jasmine* and *The Mistress of Spices* revolve around three central themes --exile, journey and sexuality. By contrasting the physical exile of the present with the psychological exile women have always suffered, they express the essential estrangement of woman in a man-made world. Journey is treated as a means of self-knowledge through re entry into collective female experience, itself redefined by the journeys from east to west. The tensions of a transplanted

existence, the struggle for survival in a world of strangers, the schizophrenic experience of woman cracked by multiple identities is common to both the states—the state of exile and the fact of being a woman---and it becomes so in the case of Jasmine and Tilo.

The complexities of race in South Asian identity remerge in the formations of sexual identities. Jasmine's perception of her race changes dramatically in her time with the Haynes family. She becomes the object of exoticization that come from Taylor's Orientalist attitude. She begins to see her sexuality as something that she can be proud of and nurture, as Taylor views her sexuality as a positive aspect of her identity. Tilo's American lover Raven also sees her as a paradigmatic representation of Eastern beauty, an authentic, real Indian as compared to the other young Indian women in the store. When they finally consummate their love, Tilo appears as a highly knowledgeable and sensual lover, and her sexuality is in stark contrast to the older asexual woman from the spice store.

Caught between the traditional customs of Indian culture from which they have migrated and their present experience with the receiving culture, both Tilo and Jasmine exist in between categorical constructions of racial, social, cultural and

Sexual identities. Jasmine undergoes a series of transformations and rebirth through often violent change in her life. Her exoticisation attracts people to her and her character metamorphoses with every new man she meets. Jasmine's enforced transformation is part of a process in which she can erode the baggage of her traditional identity allowing her to take her place at the centre of America's melting pot culture. Mukherjee ends the novel with a sense of movement which reinforces the notion that Jasmine's identity is forever evolving in relation to her surroundings. But for Jasmine to exist in the centre of culture she must negate her own cultural characteristic to the demands of her new western home. The series of adventures which Tilo undertakes during her journey from her village in India to the exploits with the pirates, then to the island, to her enclosed life in California and finally to her emergence into the new world of America. As she keeps changing throughout the novel, it only clarifies the complexity of the crisis of the self that an immigrant has to struggle with in a foreign land. As Nayan Tara becomes Bhagyavati, Bhagyavati becomes Tilotamma and Tilo becomes Maya, she stands as a metaphor for movement, change and struggle for survival.

REFERENCES

1. Banerjee Divakaruni, Chitra. *The Mistress of Spices*. London: Doubleday, 1997.
2. Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.
3. Mukherjee, Bharati. *Jasmine*. New York: Weidenfield, 1989. New Delhi: Viking, 1990.

